Ida B. Wells-Barnett House

3624 South Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Drive
Chicago, Illinois

Preliminary Staff Summary of Information
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IDA B. WELLS-BARNETT HOUSE

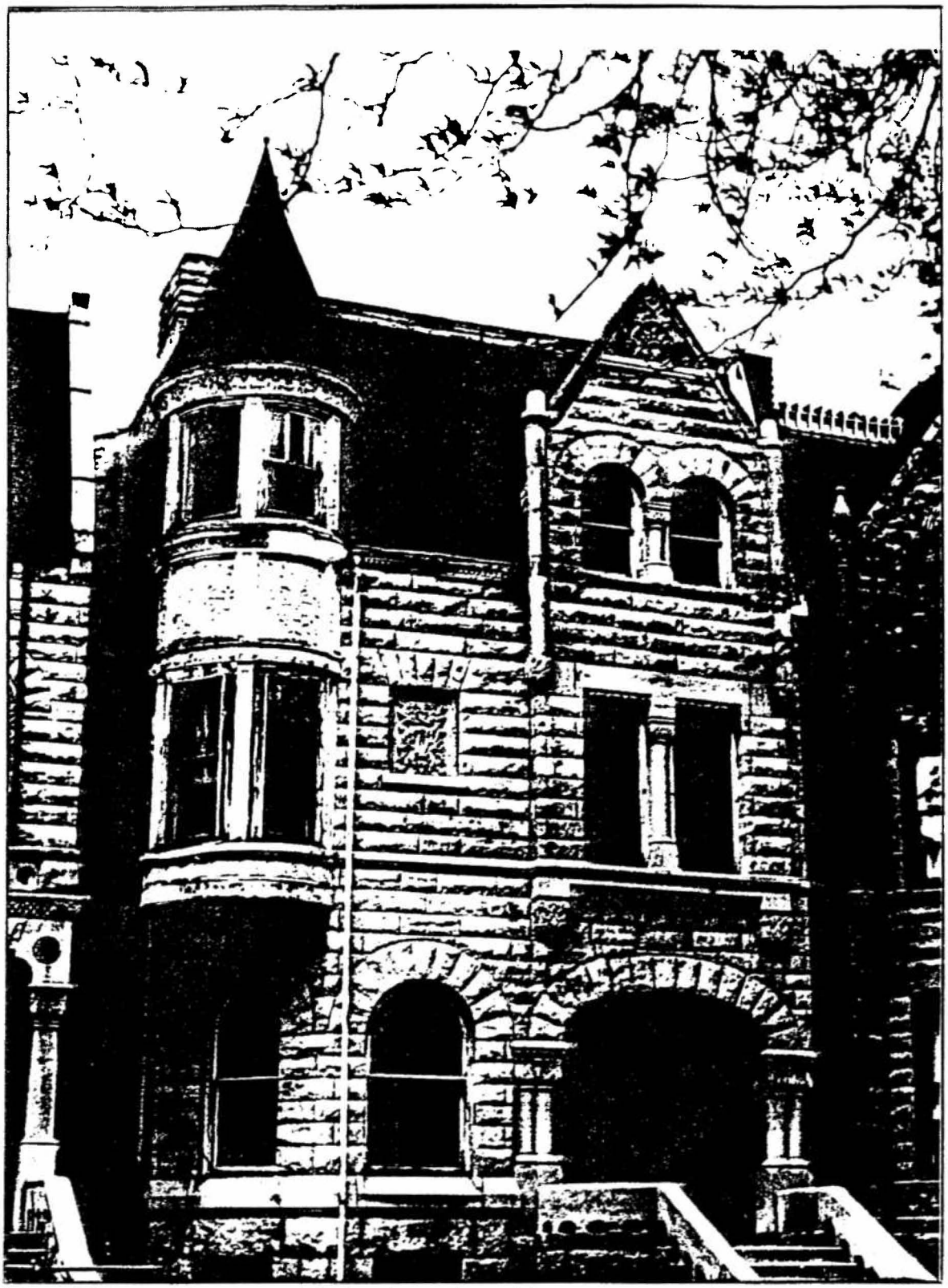
3624 South Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Drive
Chicago, Illinois

DATE OF CONSTRUCTION: Late 1880s or early 1890s

ARCHITECT: Unknown

Black civil rights activist Ida Bell Wells, her lawyer and journalist husband Ferdinand Lee Barnett, and their four children lived at 3624 King Drive from 1919 until 1929. By association, education, and profession, the family were members of Chicago's black social elite; this dignified late nineteenth-century single-family home signified their place as leaders in the black community. Quite accidentally, but appropriately, the house is sited on a street which recalls another heroic black figure. Originally Grand Boulevard, the street was renamed to commemorate the slain civil rights leader and Nobel Peace Prize winner, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in the year he died, 1968.

The Ida B. Wells-Barnett House is located in the Douglas community area on Chicago's Near South Side. The house is one in a row of gray stone residences along King Drive, a very spacious street with parkways on either side. King Drive retains a majority of its original substantially built, carefully crafted, nineteenth-century single-family homes. Strong, simple, and solid in appearance, the house is most essentially in the Richardsonian Romanesque style. Throughout the nineteenth century, the vocabulary of the eleventh- and twelfth-century Romanesque style figured in architectural grammar to such an extent that style books today refer to a Victorian Romanesque, and a Romanesque Revival as well as the Richardsonian Romanesque. The latter refers to the work of the Boston architect Henry Hobson Richardson (1838-1886) who evolved such a highly individual interpretation of the style that it eventually bore his name and inspired a plethora of followers. The Richardsonian Romanesque struck an especially responsive chord in the Midwest. Here, residents of ambitious and prosperous cities like Chicago and Minneapolis, which were just coming to maturity in the 1880s and 1890s, found in the Richardsonian Romanesque, as architectural historian Marcus Whiffen notes, "a congenial means of expression for their civic, cultural, and domestic virtues." Rivaling the Richardsonian Romanesque in popularity was the Queen Anne, and it was not uncommon for architects to cobble together a composite of both these highly favored styles. The Wells-Barnett House is most obviously Richardsonian Romanesque but incorporates the Queen Anne in detail and decoration.



The Wells-Barnett House at 3624 South Martin Luther King Jr. Drive was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1973, signifying the federal government's acknowledgment of the house's importance nationally as well as locally. *(Cathy Rocca, photographer)*

Presenting a narrow profile to the street and placed on a raised basement, the Wells-Barnett House is three stories high, with the third story behind a steeply slanted mansard roof. The building material is ashlar cut, rock-faced granite. The somewhat cavernous effect of the main entrance is created by a broad semi-circular, low-sprung arch of Syrian design supported by short, squat paired columns topped by cushion-like capitals. The capitals are decorated with intricately entwined foliate carving in a neo-Byzantine fashion. This design motif is echoed, on a reduced scale, in the single columns between the paired, deeply recessed windows of the second- and third-floor gable. Dominating the second and third stories of the house on the southeast corner is a two-story high bay in the shape of a conically capped miniature tower, called a tourelle. This feature, with its vertical emphasis, leavens the medieval massiveness of the heavy masonry construction. Enlivening the facade are stone carvings and pressed metal panels in an abstract foliate design. The Wells-Barnett House, while by an unknown architect, is a particularly fine example of the urban rowhouse of the late Victorian period.

Ida B. Wells: Beginnings in the South

Ida B. Wells was what the 1990s popular press would call a "superwoman." A contemporary of such stalwart spinsters as Susan B. Anthony, Frances L. Willard, and Jane Addams, Ida B. Wells was, like them, a tireless crusader for social justice. Unlike them, she daringly combined a career with marriage and motherhood. Ida B. Wells was born on July 16, 1862. With the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, she spent less than six months of her life in slavery. Yet she would spend some sixty years fighting against the discrimination, injustice, and social ostracism that historic document ostensibly outlawed.

The eldest of eight children, Ida B. Wells grew up in Holly Springs, Mississippi in a house owned and built by her carpenter father who ably provided for the family with the steady work available as the South rebuilt after the Civil War. Her mother, Elizabeth Warrenton, renowned for her culinary skills, imbued her daughter with her own deeply felt religious and moral convictions. Holly Springs was a hilly little town which had progressed from a cotton plantation community in the 1830s to the location of an iron foundry and the main office of the Mississippi Central Railroad by the 1860s. Fortunately for Wells, Holly Springs also housed Shaw University (later Rust College), a school established in 1866 by a Northern Methodist missionary for the Freedman's Aid Society and which, despite its name, encompassed all levels of education.

Just as Wells was about to embark on the collegiate course at Shaw, Holly Springs in 1878 was struck with a horrific yellow fever epidemic that claimed the lives of her parents and baby brother, as well as over 300 of the town's inhabitants. Sixteen-year-old Wells was determined to keep her younger brothers and sisters together. She passed the examination required for country schoolteachers and taught school for several years near Holly Springs. In 1882, with her brothers apprenticed as carpenters in Mississippi, Wells and her sisters moved to Memphis, Tennessee, to live with a widowed aunt. Securing a teaching job in Woodstock, located in the rural county of Shelby, Tennessee, Wells simultaneously studied to qualify as

a teacher in the city schools of Memphis. With her continuing thirst for knowledge, she also took courses at Fisk University in Nashville.

1884 marked Ida B. Wells' debut as a fearless advocate for social justice when she had her first adult experience with Jim Crowism. Although the law stated that blacks were entitled to equal accomodations on railroad trains, it was common practice for railroad personnel to force blacks to sit in the smoking car even if they had bought a first-class seat. When a train conductor attempted to make Wells submit to this policy, she stubbornly refused. It took the combined efforts of three men to eject Wells from the train at the next stop to the cheering approval of the white passengers. Physically bruised, with the sleeves of her linen duster in tatters, Wells returned to Memphis and courageously filed a lawsuit against the Chesapeake, Ohio & Southwestern Railroad. The court returned a verdict in her favor and awarded her five hundred dollars in damages. Regrettably, in 1887, the Supreme Court of Tennessee overturned the verdict when the railroad appealed the case. In her writings, Ida B. Wells admitted to feeling "utterly discouraged and sorely, bitterly disappointed," but as would become her lifelong habit, she determinedly soldiered on.

Ida B. Wells: Civil Rights Advocate

Motivated to share her personal experience with the legal system, Wells penned an account of the case for *The Living Way*, a black church weekly. Thus Ida B. Wells began her career as journalist and publicist, finding a vocation at which she excelled and which she enjoyed. This one article escalated into a weekly column which attracted the attention of black newspaper editors around the country. By 1886, Ida B. Wells, writing under the pen name "Iola," became a regular feature in such prestigious black newspapers as T. Thomas Fortune's *New York Age*, the Detroit *Plaindealer*, and the Indianapolis *Freeman*. She edited the Home Department of *Our Women and Children* and wrote too for magazines such as the *American Baptist* and the *AME Church Review*. Some of Wells' writing was merely reportorial, reviewing plays and concerts, recounting club meetings. Gradually, however, she broadened to the more relevant social issues. Her writing was ardent but could also be abrasive, as she never hesitated to chastise even the leaders of her own race if she thought their behavior warranted censure. Meeting her at the National Afro-American Press Convention in 1889 (where Wells was unanimously elected secretary), T. Thomas Fortune, then the foremost black journalist, commented, "She has become famous as one of the few of our women who can handle a goose quill with diamond point as easily as any man in newspaper work. If Iola were a man she would be a humming independent in politics. She has plenty of nerve and is as sharp as a steel trap."

In 1889, while still teaching to support herself, Wells was invited to write for the militant *Free Speech and Headlight*, owned by J. L. Fleming and the Reverend Taylor Nightingale, pastor of the largest Baptist congregation in Tennessee. This was the Beal Street Church where the newspaper was published. In 1891, an editorial severely critical of the Memphis Board of Education for the incompetent teachers and substandard conditions in black schools led to

A drawing of Ida B. Wells at age twenty-five appeared in I. Garland Penn's 1891 publication *The Afro-American Press and Its Editors.*

Wells' dismissal from the Memphis school system. Shortening the name of the newspaper to *Free Speech*, Wells turned to making that organ a full-time, self-sustaining enterprise, traveling throughout Mississippi and Tennessee soliciting subscriptions, advertising, and correspondents. Within a year, her salary came to within ten dollars of what she had received as a teacher, and the circulation had increased from four hundred to fifteen thousand. Due to Wells' unstinting commitment, *Free Speech* became a respected and meaningful voice for the blacks of the South.

1892 proved to be the pivotal year in Ida B. Wells' life. The event that was to profoundly alter the tenor and course of her career was the savage lynching of three young black businessmen, owners of the People's Grocery Company. All three were known to Wells, but one in particular, Tom Moss, was a close personal friend, and Wells was his daughter's godmother. Wells knew their only "crime" had been to prove themselves as capable competitors to a neighboring white grocer. In common with most, Wells believed that lynching was a punishment reserved only for the most depraved crimes of sexual assault. Now she saw that, in reality, lynching was murder in cold blood fueled by a mob violence mentality. Seeking any tool to restore white supremacy in the South, the authorities condoned, even lauded lynching. Fearlessly, knowing that white fury could quickly turn against her, Wells nonetheless created havoc in Memphis. She filled *Free Speech* with scathing editorials exposing the truth and galvanizing the black community into action. She urged blacks to leave Memphis and they did.

In two months time, six thousand blacks left Memphis and headed West. One pastor led his entire congregation to California, another to Kansas. The newly opened Oklahoma Territory promised a safe haven, but Memphis newspapers printed discouraging stories about the hostile Indians and harsh climate to abort the black exodus. True to form, Wells went to Oklahoma to see for herself and returned to dispel the myths. As she stated in her autobiography, "For the first time in their lives the white people of Memphis had seen earnest, united action by Negroes which upset economic and business conditions." Retail establishments that depended on black patronage began to fail. Wells, recognizing the gift for music inherent in black culture, especially noted, "Music houses had more musical instruments, sold on the

installment plan, thrown back on their hands than they could find storage for." Memphis households were suddenly bereft of cooks, maids, nannies, gardeners, chauffeurs, and carpenters. Those that stayed behind boycotted the public streetcar system to such an extent that the executives of the City Railway Company personally visited Wells, imploring her influence for the return of passengers.

Looking for a scapegoat, conservative Memphis whites blamed the inflammatory rhetoric of *Free Speech*. Particularly offensive was an editorial in which Wells suggested that some of the sexual assault cases that led to lynching might have been instigated by the immorality of white women who lusted after black men, rather than just the depravity of the black man. The office of the paper was set on fire and the presses were destroyed. Fortunately, at the time Wells was in Philadelphia covering the African Methodist Episcopal Conference. She was warned she would be hanged in the courthouse square should she dare to return to Memphis. Her exile from the South would last for thirty years.

Relocating to New York City, Wells was immediately hired as a columnist for the newspaper *New York Age*. The paper in a special issue gave front page coverage to her story, and thousands of copies were distributed across the country. However, the only member of the white press to take notice was a weekly columnist for the Chicago *Inter-Ocean*, Judge Albion W. Turgee. Unexpectedly, a fund-raising event for the resurrection of *Free Speech* gave Wells the platform she needed to reach a wider audience. Two hundred and fifty black New York women had organized a testimonial meeting for Wells on October 5, 1892. Electric lights above the platform spelled out "Iola," Wells' pen name. Miniature copies of *Free Speech* were given out as programs. The gala event raised $500, and Wells was presented with a gold brooch in the shape of a pen that she wore proudly for many years to come. But more importantly, this was the forum that launched Wells' career as a public speaker as she recounted her story for the assembled women.

Ida B. Wells was already a compelling writer; now she became an equally persuasive speaker. For the next four months, Wells lectured in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C., coming in contact with such venerable civil rights leaders as Frederick Douglass and Mary Church Turrell as well as William Still of Underground Railroad fame and old-time abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, Jr. During the next two years, Wells traveled the lecture circuit in England, Scotland, and Wales. The *Manchester Guardian* described Wells' "quiet, refined manner, her intelligence and earnestness, her avoidance of all oratorical tricks, and her dependence upon the simple eloquence of facts." In 1895, this latter ability was translated into a publication, *The Red Record*, the first statistical study of lynching and mob violence in America. Impressed by the civic organizations of progressive English women, Wells inspired American black women to follow suit. The first civic club for black women, the Women's Era Club, was founded in Boston with the most prominent black woman of that city, Mrs. Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, as president. In Chicago, the club was named the Ida B. Wells Club, a signal of the high esteem with which Wells was now regarded.

Ida B. Wells: In Chicago

In the 1890s, the black population of Chicago more than doubled. Since the Civil War, a new generation of black Americans had come of age in the South. Despite being born as free men, they came of age at a time when white Southerners established Jim Crow laws designed to segregate and disenfranchise them. Opportunities denied them at home appeared available in the large urban centers of the North. Besides Ida B. Wells, other newcomers to Chicago in the 1890s included Robert Abbott, founder of the *Chicago Defender*, Jesse Binga, founder of the first black-owned bank in Chicago, and Reverend Archibald Carey, pastor of Quinn Chapel A.M.E. Church (designated a Chicago Landmark in 1977) who, as historian Allan H. Spears noted, "successfully used his congregation as a base for personal political power."

What brought Ida B. Wells to Chicago was the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition. Unlike the other visitors, she came not to admire, but to admonish. Wells was incredulous to find that the United States government, which invited the nations of the world to participate in celebrating the founding of America four hundred years earlier, yet still denied the African-American participation in the fair. Despite repeated petitions, all overtures to the authorities proved fruitless. With the help of Frederick Douglass and journalists Ferdinand L. Barnett and I. Garland Penn, Wells wrote, edited, and published *The Reason Why the Colored American is Not Represented in the World's Columbian Exposition.* Wise in the ways of public relations, she saw that the introduction was translated into French and German to better inform European visitors of racial discrimination in the United States. At least 10,000 copies of the pamphlet were distributed. In it, Wells pointed out that a year before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock, the first slave ship had landed at Jamestown, and most succinctly said that, "The exhibit of the progress made by a race in 24 years of freedom as against 250 years of slavery would have been the greatest tribute to the greatness and progressiveness of American institutions which could have been shown to the world." As a result of Wells' lobbying, chagrined officials belatedly planned a special "Colored Americans Day." At first, Wells viewed this as an insult rather than an honor and was especially horrified to find that 2,000 free watermelons would be distributed. However, Frederick Douglass, whom Ida greatly admired, managed to use the day as a platform to denounce not only black exclusion from the Fair but from all walks of American life.

If controversy had first brought Ida B. Wells to Chicago, it was a much less confrontational issue that motivated her decision to stay. She fell in love. On June 27, 1895, Wells married Ferdinand L. Barnett, a prominent figure in Chicago's black community for over twenty years. Barnett was a graduate of the law school that later became affiliated with Northwestern University and was the founder of the *Conservator*, the first black newspaper in Chicago. Later entering politics with allegiance to the party of Lincoln, Barnett became the first black to be appointed Assistant State's Attorney, a post he held for fourteen years. In 1900, Barnett became head of the Negro Bureau of the Republican National Committee and in 1906, but for blatant racial prejudice, would have been elected to the municipal court.

Barnett was a widower with two young sons when he married Wells, and their union would bring four more children. Charles Aked, born in 1896, was named after the Reverend

Charles F. Aked, one of the leaders of the anti-lynching crusade in England. Herman Kohlstaat, born in 1897, was named for H. H. Kohlstaat, a famous restauranteur and one of the strongest supporters of the Barnett's civic activism. Ida B. Wells, Jr., was born in 1901, and Alfreda M. was born in 1904. Subsequent to her marriage, Wells often publicly retained her maiden name, but at times referred to herself as Mrs. Barnett.

Wells, who had changed her wedding date three times in order to fulfill speaking engagements, fully expected to combine marriage and motherhood with her professional responsibilities as editor of the *Conservator* and president of the Ida B. Wells Club. Toddlers in tow, Wells unabashedly went to Washington, D. C. to participate in the national meeting of the Association of Colored Women's Clubs and traveled throughout Illinois on a voter registration campaign. Although soundly rebuked by Susan B. Anthony for "having a divided duty," Wells did curtail her frenetic pace somewhat until all her children were of school age. She found motherhood unexpectedly to her liking, a new and rewarding challenge. At first reluctant, as she believed her maternal instincts had been amply satisfied tending to her younger siblings, and loathe to leave the public arena, Wells discovered being a mother was "a profession by itself" and one in which she felt a woman "owed it to herself to become as expert as possible."

In the years from 1895 to 1909, Wells was instrumental in the founding of the National Association of Colored Women, the National Afro-American Council (1898), and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (1909). However, as might be expected, increasingly her attention was centered on local affairs. She helped to found the first kindergarten in Chicago's black community and supported the opening of the first black theater. She railed against the segregationist policies of such establishment organizations as the Y.M.C.A. and the Y.W.C.A., the Salvation Army, the Women's Christian Temperance Union, and the Women's Model Lodging House which advertised accommodations to all females "except drunkards, immoral women, and negro women." While acclaimed as a breakthrough new art form, the film *Birth of a Nation* especially aroused Wells' ire with its implicit endorsement of the atrocities of the Ku Klux Klan. Mildred I. Thompson, Wells' biographer, estimates the following as being most illustrative of Wells' methodology for the pursuit of social justice:

> Perhaps the most outstanding achievement of Ida Wells-Barnett during her years as a Chicago resident was her challenge to the reinstatement of Frank Davis, sheriff of Cairo, Illinois, who had allowed two lynchings in his jurisdiction. Representing the blacks of Chicago, she interviewed Cairo residents to establish the sheriff's negligence. Armed with a legal brief written by her attorney husband and petitions signed by Cairo residents, she successfully presented a case against the sheriff's reinstatement before the governor of the state. Moreover, she pointed out that the statute that Governor Charles Duneen had upheld in enforcing the retirement of the sheriff, the Anti-Mob Violence Statute of 1905, had been spirited into law largely through the efforts of the one black legislator elected five years before.

On January 1, 1910, the *Chicago Defender* carried an account of the Cairo incident and noted, "If we only had a few men with the backbone of Mrs. Barnett, lynching would soon come to a halt in America." In fact, Wells' personal courage and political savvy in handling the Cairo incident effectively stopped lynching in Illinois.

Between 1910 and 1917, Wells again took the lead for the betterment of black Chicagoans. Inspired by the example of Jane Addams and the social settlement movement, in 1910 Wells formed the Negro Fellowship League, a shelter, recreation, and employment center for southern migrants, then the poorest and most downtrodden of the city's black populace. Another innovation on Wells' part was her commitment to the development of political awareness among black women. The Alpha Suffrage Club, founded in 1913, had matured to a point of influence by 1915, the first election in Illinois in which women had a limited vote (for trustees of the University of Illinois) and the one in which the first black alderman, Oscar DePriest, was elected in Chicago. Never quiescent, Wells herself ran for public office as an Illinois state senator in 1930.

This photograph of Ida B. Wells at the age of sixty-eight is from *The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*, edited by her daughter, Alfreda M. Duster.

The 1920s saw the Wells-Barnett family ensconced in their new house on King Drive where they had moved from 3234 S. Rhodes (now demolished). This more commodious home was where Ferdinand and Ida would live with their children until March of 1929 when, with their one as-yet unmarried daughter, they moved to an apartment building at 343 E. Garfield Boulevard. With her children now reaching adulthood, Wells could see that her devotion to motherhood was paying handsome dividends. Close enough to slavery to remember that bondage had denied the blacks the opportunity to learn to read and write, Wells had made education a priority for the children. The children's maternal grandmother had accompanied Wells to school, staying only so long as to be literate enough to read her

Bible; yet two grandsons would graduate from law school and a granddaughter would earn a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago. At least on a domestic front, Wells could point with justifiable pride to some advancement for blacks.

However, the peace and prosperity enjoyed largely by so many during the 1920s was not accorded to the majority of black Americans. Discrimination was still widely prevalent in the schools, the military, and in housing and employment. Race riots flared in Arkansas, southern Illinois, and the stock yards district of Chicago. As a seasoned veteran, Wells employed her usual tactics. Visiting the scene personally, she covered the events firsthand for black newspapers and then solicited various political and social service organizations to protest the violence. Equally dismaying during the 1920s for Wells and her husband was the realization that their relentless fight against segregation and a biracial system, accompanied by a strategy of militant protest, was being eclipsed, even disdained by other civil rights leaders. A new ideology, popularized by Booker T. Washington and his followers at the Tuskegee Institute, had risen. It called on blacks to practice self-help and self-reliance and to organize their own economic and civic institutions, as Allan H. Spear describes in *Black Chicago*:

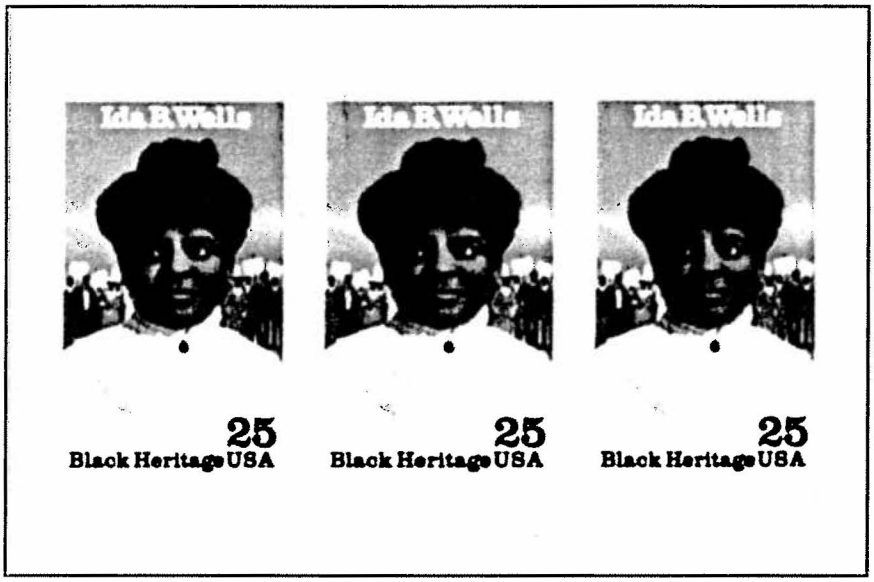
> While the ultimate goal of integration was never abandoned in Chicago, it was temporarily relegated to the background. Negro leaders now showed a willingness to work within the framework of a biracial institutional structure and encourage the semiautonomous development of the Black community.

Wells, fearing that the story of her generation would be lost by the black community and wary of how white historians would interpret her brand of activism, began in 1928 to write her biography. The book was almost complete when, after a brief illness, she died on March 25, 1931. Wells' biography would not be published until 1970, but her example was not forgotten. Once compared in the 1890s to the Biblical prophet Deborah for her crusading leadership, Ida B. Wells, as Linda Peavy notes in *Women Who Changed Things:*

> . . . was courageous enough to lead the way moving into the heat of conflict, going where no man or woman had dared to go before, setting an example that would only be followed years after her death when the activists of the '50s and '60s launched the nationwide campaign that culminated in the sweeping civil rights legislation of the 1960s.

Fortunately, Ida B. Wells-Barnett is now both visible and valued not only in Chicago but in American history. Initial recognition came in 1940 when the forty-seven-acre South Parkway Garden Apartments was renamed the Ida B. Wells Homes. This project, the first federal housing in Chicago, was built on a human scale as opposed to the later high-rises. To associate them with a woman who devoted her life to a better quality of life for her fellow human beings seems an appropriate acknowledgment. A Chicago public school is also named after Ida B. Wells, and in 1950 she was counted as one of the twenty-five outstanding women in the city's history. National tribute was paid to Wells in 1990 when, as a part of the Black Heritage

Series of Stamps, a twenty-five-cent Ida B. Wells commemorative stamp was issued by the Postal Service. In colors of purple, yellow, magenta, and black, the stamp features a portrait of Wells based on several photographs taken of her during the mid-1890s. A line of pickets forms the background, symbolizing her anti-lynching crusade and her fierce battle against racism. Ida B. Wells now figures prominently in chronicles of the black community and the feminist movement. But her unquenchable spirit and her unyielding commitment to social justice transcends compartmentalization. Rather, Ida B. Wells is a role model for all Americans.



Recognition of Ida B. Wells' place in United States history is today widespread due to a commemorative stamp issued in her honor by the U.S. Postal Service in 1990.

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Additional material used in the preparation of this report is on file at the office of the Commission on Chicago Landmarks and is available to the public.

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